

The Arts not only changes lives, but can literally save them.

I am the resident playwright and founding board member of the Emerson Theater Collaborative (ETC), a non-profit theater company based in Mystic that develops and produces innovative theatre with a focus on diversity, youth, and the underrepresented, and supports both emerging and professional artists.

Last year ETC collaborated with two other non-profits: The Light House, a community based organization that provides functional education and life skills to both youth and adults with disabilities, and The Riverfront Children's Center that serves young children year round by providing high quality, affordable childcare and educational services while comprehensively nurturing the unique needs of children and their families in Southeastern CT.

We received funding from a FY2016 COA/ACI – Arts Impact Community Grant through the State of Connecticut to establish this collaboration in order to bring the arts to non-arts organizations by producing a play with an anti-bullying theme. I wrote the play, Always Picked Last based on Kevin Kearns autobiographical book of the same name. The play focuses on Kevin and the bullying that he endures as an adolescent, but eventually triumphs over despite the loss of his father and the lack of adult intervention.

Both youth on and off the autism spectrum were cast in the play, and in the past, all of them had experienced being bullied first hand. So I thought it was important that every youth involved in the production had an opportunity to have a voice and express themselves. Some of the cast members wrote and performed powerful, original monologues about their personal experiences being bullied, and these monologues were woven throughout the play. The youth from the Riverfront Children's Center sung original songs (composed by Kayla Farnham) and created artwork on the topic of bullying, and how to overcome and prevent it. Their artwork, which incorporated original writings, was exhibited at the performances for the audience to view during intermission.

Some of the youth from The Light House had dreams of being on the stage, but never had an opportunity to be part of a theatrical production until they were cast in Always Picked Last. I watched as their confidence grew and talent blossomed from the first rehearsal to the last performance, and as lead instructor and playwright, I was very proud of them all. The students expressed then how much they enjoyed the experience, and even now, still talk about it when our paths have crossed in the community.

Kathy Greene, the Executive Director of The Light House has commented multiple times on how “wonderful” the production was for her students, and how their performances far exceeded all expectations by their parents and teachers. I've included part of a written statement by Ms. Greene. See below. (Full statement attached also.)

“What I saw on Friday night, May 6th was amazing. I had no idea what to expect, but our students were so mixed into the play with many cast members that you could not tell who was who. One of our students had the lead for the 2 hour play. The others had several parts throughout the play. I was so proud of what had come together. I saw the look on these student’s parents faces. To be so proud. Too many times they have been told what their children could not do. The successful accomplishment of each in this play was publically clear. You need to understand that in each student’s school, they would not have been part of a play, especially to have a major part.

The gift this play gave each student was: a true sense of inclusion and accomplishment; understanding of a new skill/leisure activity that they could enjoy again; bragging rights for a job well done; more confidence in their abilities and social skills and many compliments that usually were not part of their lives.

I sincerely hope that this grant can be available next year. What a difference this play made in our student’s lives.”

Respectfully submitted, Kathy Greene, Executive Director

As I stated previously – The arts not only changes lives, but also saves them. One student who was cast in the play recently told me that a friend of hers attended one of the performances, and as a result, it saved her life. Her friend had been bullied so badly she was considering suicide, but after she saw the play, she felt empowered and not so alone. She is now speaking and carrying herself with more confidence and has gotten the support she needs.

Finally, community members and friends of mine who attended the play sent me an email with their feedback:

Hi Lisa,

A huge thank you to you and all the staff and youth that made this powerful performance so successful! Rich and I felt like "proud parents" as we watched the performing youths express themselves with conviction and confidence. The strong message delivered through the talented performers, not only, made us more aware of bullying but the play provided an expressive outlet for our youth to share their own experiences with bullying.

A heartfelt thanks to all the performers, staff and the community that made this production possible. May this strong stand on bullying resonate though out our community!

Jane and Richard (Stonington, CT Residents)

I am grateful to have been a part of this production. It would not have happened without the support of a FY2016 COA/ACI - Arts and Community Impact Grant from the State of Connecticut. Please continue to support the arts and save lives!

*Sincerely,
Lisa A. Giordano
2/16/17*

Note: Kathy Greene’s full statement is on the next page.

May 16, 2016

To: ETC

Re: Always Picked Last

Last year, when discussion with ETC, Riverfront Children’s Center and Light House occurred concerning a collaborative grant to produce a play, we all agreed to the collaboration. This was easy because we had worked together on fundraisers and programs for children of all ages and abilities.

I think it was difficult to visualize how this play would come together and what would be the valuable take away for our students, staff and families. The students and staff in our Light House, LIVECTA transition program for those identified with high functioning autism had never been part of a play. Change and new things are not easy for our students, but four (3 males, 1 female and 1 male staff) took a chance to be part of Always Picked Last. There was a huge commitment made by them. I think it was hard for the students to see how all the rehearsals would come together for the final product.

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